

Languages as Socio-cultural Capital in the Context of Contemporary Linguistic Reality of Jamaica

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How Do Our Students Meet Language?

In Jamaica, the linguistic landscape has been a contested battle field shaped by notions of a 'high' language; Standard Jamaican English which is juxtaposed against what was originally the language of peasants; Jamaican Creole. The latter is perceived as a failed attempt at 'trying' to speak English. Here, Standard Jamaican English, an emblem of cultural imperialism linked to our colonial heritage is embraced as the language of prestige and social mobility. Although the script for examining language on a global scale has changed to include a more accommodating mode where cultural diversity has become acceptable even in former colonial regimes, Jamaica is still locked into war of words regarding the status of the mother tongue of over 97% of its population. Some students of mostly non-English speaking background in a particular tertiary institutions in Jamaica, when asked to reflect on their linguistic journey related rather traumatic ways in which they discovered as children that the language spoken at home and for some, even at school was what in the Jamaican parlance referred to as 'chatting badly' or 'bad English.' Many of our students, especially those from Creole-speaking backgrounds are left scarred linguistically and have developed warped sense of self-definition as they try to reconstruct and make sense of their language space and identity. Many agreed that they spoke Jamaican Creole but 'tried' to use English albeit only when they have to do so. Others stated that they have one full language; Jamaican Creole and a half language; English. Such students lacked the confidence to speak publicly about their linguistic ineptitude or the verbal and physical abuse they had encountered in using Creole or 'trying' to learn English. Such unnecessary experiences point to the feeling of ambivalence, low self-efficacy and sense of inadequacy many Creole-speakers take to learning situations where the language of school is Standard English. One student stated that English was her first language

although she was from an inner-city community but explained that she was pinched in school whenever she used Jamaican Creole while at the Traditional High School that she later attended, using English was the norm. Interestingly, in contrast, to their Jamaican counterparts, students from the Eastern Caribbean who spoke French Creole were more noticeably exuberant and confident in sharing and entertaining their Jamaican peers using their native tongue. It is clear then, that in reality, English is a second language for many Jamaican students and without being placed into situations where they are given opportunities or contexts for using English, this language may remain dormant. Furthermore, the methodology used to get them to acquire the language is sending the erroneous message that Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole represent a single language spectrum that many fail to use correctly or 'properly.' Not so, stated many of our vociferous linguists in the Jamaica Language Unit at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus.

The linguistic data on Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English hold that both have valued functions as part of our heritage and each shares distinctly separate grammar in areas of phonology, syntax and semantics despite a shared lexical base rooted in English. If the research speaks to this distinction then the need for an explicit language policy that accords empowerment to both languages in the linguistic space of Jamaica is a wholesome social infrastructure that is necessary to create the ethos for a healthy perception of self and language among our citizens. The political will to act in accordance with this commonsense approach is really crucial at this phase in our history of self-determinism. Moving from political independence to full independence requires liberated languages that include all the voices and histories in society. We should honour our National Motto, "out of many, one people." We must also recognize that the region is blessed with many linguistic resources available in a growing multilingual regional population. The success of Caricom integration is intertwined in the language conundrum in which our societies exist. The French speaking Caribbean territories have progressed much further in terms of forging clear paths for language planning and policies to guide how linguistic relations and national identities are shaped internally as well as externally with neighbours and the wider global community. Perhaps we should apply some metaphors to represent language in digestible ways in a bid to unravel how best languages should be treated at each level

of education in Jamaica and in extension the Caribbean.

Establishing a Viable Language Pedagogy in a Creole Speaking Environment

How Should our Citizens Meet Language?

Our students should recognize that Mother Languages are exotic merchandise in the social arena and such languages encode the identity and history of users. Thus, a native language is part of the intangible wealth of any nation. It sets the group apart from any other speaker and exists as an intangible national asset that secures aspects of culture that cannot be readily objectified or monetized. The Mother Tongue is the most defining aspect of one's identity and should be cherished. It encases the social, cultural, spiritual, ancestral as well as personal identities of individuals and groups. It is like the DNA of the social fibre of our being. We may say then that language provides a blue-print of our history and it is the key to our identity. A key message we should also send to Caribbean citizens is that language is a lived experience not lifeless symbols in a book. Thus, language is alive and dynamic; not inert, static or dormant! As users of language, we are active agents; not passive by-standers. Naom Chomsky noted that the ability to acquire language is innate. If we have accepted this premise as truth, then people are live agents who actively engage each other through common meaningful utterances as they bring language to life and sustain social living. People use language in its multifaceted forms to stay closely knitted and vibrant and to form linkages. Because languages are alive, languages can die if they are not used. As we speak, it is predicted that of the world's seven thousand languages, approximately 25% will disappear by the year 2025 (National Geographic, 2012). Naturally, without a shared language, a community will crumble into pluralistic clusters of ethnic, social or cultural divide as is evident to some extent in Jamaica and other societies with social group tension based on class or ethnicity. Jamaican (Creole), as a language is a common thread that all Jamaicans can understand and use whether passively or actively. All Jamaicans can therefore share in this privilege as active users of our cultural heritage. But to what extent do all Jamaicans coalesce around a common language? Like Creole, Standard Jamaican English has its own distinctive features that set it apart from other variations of world Englishes. The distinction is evident in the accent and

many of our idiomatic expressions which distinguish us from other users of English even among the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean islands. We should equally embrace this aspect of our culture with confidence and purpose. After all, as the language of commerce, science and government, the English Language is the passport to the rest of the world and ticket to a viable future with heightened life chances.

It is sound reasoning to agree based on the arguments above that in the natural world, water, air and sunshine are necessary to sustain life. Conversely, in the social realm, without a common language, life is meaningless or non-existent and groups may disintegrate into chaos as seen in some countries where language is used as a political tool to stratify people and create strife. No one can deny that language especially nowadays, is a socio-cultural capital or merchandise with tremendous economic and cultural values. We want our students as well as stakeholders responsible for planning and delivering language policies and instructions to recognize the fact that Language is a social currency with economic possibilities and opportunities for social advancement and well-being. As part of our intangible wealth, the internal structure of the native Jamaican language which is based on years of research should be taught to every Jamaican citizen including individuals in the creative industries who are cultural ambassadors on the world stage. I will digress here to state that the media, the Centre for Lifelong Learning, churches, musicians, playwrights and other artistes or artists should promote knowledge of the internal structure of the native tongue of Jamaicans. How and where should this be taught is up for discussion but it surely should not be confined to classrooms. Foreigners who seem to be more culturally and economically astute are studying and learning the language; and are aware of its worth as an exotic product. If we are not careful, it may take a similar flight as Reggae which is said to have relocated to Paris, the new Reggae capital of the world. Hollywood has taken notice while we sit back in malaise. As cultural agents, it is part of our mandate to keep our native language, authentic and visible despite challenges.

In terms of learning other languages even in conversational mode, the need to be versatile and multilingual is self-evident and prudent in this seamless global village. If we, as a country are going to prepare graduates to be global citizens with high levels

of competence and versatility as the National Pledge mandates, then we need to buttress our students with the requisite skills necessary to command the attention of a multiplicity of audiences or clienteles on a global scale. Should we offer more international languages other than English and Spanish thus expanding the mandate stated in the draft Language Policy of Jamaica? As a forward thinking, proactive, creative community we should definitely offer the major languages of the Latin Caribbean markets. We should also consider 'the other people' who came to Jamaica outside of those from Africa and Europe. We have enough Jamaicans with East Indian ancestry in Jamaica who should want to learn Hindi or Urdu as part of their ancestral gifts. The Chinese community, to my mind is not fully integrated into mainstream Jamaica so in recognition of the 'many' referred to in our National Motto, we can offer a better sense of self to the descendants of Chinese who may want to learn or sustain the use of Cantonese or Mandarin. Our Continuing Education institutions, libraries and tourism thrust can be restructured and re-energized to appeal to all these segmented groups in our society. Additionally, studies in African and other languages whether infused as part of the history curriculum or as discrete areas should be a part of the curriculum offered to our citizens. To be authentic, each language should be taught alongside or encased in its history and culture. We therefore need to teach English beside a living culture with a history of its own as we do when we teach other world languages.

We should be mindful that the mother tongue is usually acquired; not learned, however, in learning a second language, explicit attempts at teaching the nature of that language is necessary. Contextualizing language in its culture and history using primary sources as referent points is significant to the formation of a stable identity. As a child, I was called a 'Red Igbo' by an elderly lady, Miss Mattie, who thought I was being rude when I rolled a mango towards her walking stick out of fear of her unpredictable temper at the time. I envisioned this label, Red Igbo as a single word and felt much clearer about what was meant when a colleague from the Igbo tribe in Eastern Nigeria taught me that Red Igbo was a term used to label the members of his tribe with lighter skin tone. Was Miss Mattie, a direct descendant of the Igbo tribe in Nigeria? A new surge of curiosity about my language and past has been sparked by this new knowledge. I felt a similar sense of curiosity and experienced a heightened

understanding of my mother tongue when this said colleague told me that 'unu' was an Igbo word used to mean 'all of you' as used in Jamaican. In another example, I felt affirmed as a person with an interesting cultural identity, when a Zulu guide in the heart of Zululand in the Kingdom of Shaka Zulu in South Africa showed a group of Jamaicans what was known to us as 'kata.' This artifact, he referred to as 'ekata.' As a people, those aspects of our history that are rooted in slavery are often easily thrown under the carpet. Many blacks in the region cannot explore their ancestral roots with great success unlike other racial groups with more systematic documentation of their past or with a less traumatic upheaval and migration story. Our surnames are not reliable starting points for anthropological studies as our forefathers were mostly given the names of the slave masters rather than their African names or they were given the European surnames of their Caucasian biological fathers. It is clear then that our native tongue is more readily available as a reliable anthropological tool in exploring our past. Indeed, reading about these connections to my past on a page probably would not have had the profound effect as it did while I was experiencing language in its natural setting or hearing from native speakers of the African languages from which our Creole emerged after co-mingling with European languages. With technology, documentaries can provide useful sources for situating languages in their true cultural and historical contexts.

Students should see language as a tool kit with resources that they take with them to use on demand in different contexts. Those who are artists or artistes can be tactical and more dynamic in arrangements if they tailor the delivery of their crafts to match the cultural makeup of clients, patrons or audiences. For example, the psychological edge or benefit if a Jamaican band presenting to a largely Spanish speaking or French speaking audience could have vocalists moving between local dialects or the major language/s of the audience and English would be immeasurable! Since language is encased in history then a cultural knowledge of regional and major world centres would also add more meaningful interaction in each creative endeavour. To what extent then do we make history and languages authentic and alive by seeking readily available primary sources during content delivery?

Language is Status Laden and Power Driven

A large portion of a society can be disenfranchised and excluded from the centre of power and decision making if the language of the people is nullified, ridiculed or silenced either by explicit or implicit actions or inaction on the part of the powers that be. In Jamaica, infrastructural policies pertaining to the physical aspects of the economy are readily debated and supported in Parliament, while policies relating to the social infrastructure necessary to set the tone for healthy social interaction and discourse are often disregarded or addressed in a haphazard manner. Every effective teacher or successful academic institution knows that to be successful they must first establish a clear social curriculum to guide how the class or school population interacts among each other before attempting the business of teaching the formal curriculum. In like manner, a clear linguistic framework is necessary at the macro-level of this society to order the way different social groups can amicably relate and negotiate power.

In advocating the need for a clear language policy, the school analogy can also be used to argue that the premise on which a monolingual approach is used to teach English goes against sound pedagogy. First of all, current theories on how to maximize learning advances that content should be organized from the known to the unknown. This theory, therefore, augurs that if Jamaican Creole is the language that most students acquire before starting school, then this familiar code should be used as the bridge to learning other codes. A meta-cognitive approach as a learning theory also supports the view that students should explicitly learn how to learn. Students, therefore, need to understand explicitly the internal structure of both their first and second language so as to help them understand general principles about the nature of language. The school language should therefore be presented as “a different way of saying” something instead of being projected as ‘not speaking properly’ or “chatting bad.” A third learning principle to be considered in forging a sound instructional approach is the idea advanced by Jean Piaget, constructivist learning theorist, who states that we store information in mental schemes based on common criteria. If we should apply this principle, then a monolingual approach in which both varieties are stored in a single schema would contradict this view. It would also contravene data put

forward by linguists such as Professor Hubert Devonish and Dr. Michelle Kennedy-Stewart of the Jamaica Language Unit who advocate that we speak two separate languages with distinct rules at every linguistic level. Noted American linguist, Stephen Krashen (1978) reiterates that the function of language is to communicate and methods in teaching second languages should include comprehensible input and conscious self monitoring especially for older learners. He also points to the need to lower what he calls the affective filter to facilitate uninhibited risk taking by the second language learner. For him, language learning should occur naturally. These principles are apt and pertinent in forging a reliable approach to language acquisition in Creole-speaking environments like Jamaica where the dominant mother tongue is sidelined and invalidated.

The Way Forward- Possibilities and Trajectory

Based on the discussion, we can agree, that at the macro-level of society, a systemic approach that recognizes and includes all voices of the language motif of each speech community is crucial in addressing the language situation of Jamaica and other countries of the region. Countries such as Haiti, St Lucia, Dominica and Curacao have addressed policy issues aimed at recognizing the native tongue of their people as the starting point for negotiating meanings in other languages such as English, French or Dutch. These languages are reflective of the unique historical milieu of these territories. Until we achieve similar milestones in Jamaica, we should bring language alive in a cultural and historical framework that befits each language. Also, the internal structure of each variation of languages prevailing in any country should be explicitly taught to avoid cross interferences. Instead of portraying Creole as 'bad' English, we need to use live sources to present it as an authentic derivative language forged through European and African contact or a process of hybridization as some scholars choose to represent this outcome. What do we stand to lose if educators assemble video clippings or documentaries of native users of these languages of origin to explain the ancestral roots of Jamaican words of African or European derivatives? Surely, authentic approaches should be integral to second language instruction. What do we stand to lose, therefore, if our cultural institutions offer the opportunity for in-depth studies in languages that can shape the overall curriculum of art forms and the

language curriculum at the macro-level of the society or region?

Indeed, if we work with our embassies and local ethnic organizations, our possibilities for engaging in the undoing of the linguistic divide in Jamaica are limitless. If culture is pivotal to our economy then we do have a duty as a nation or region, to help forge this new course of linguistic understanding among our people. Celebrating all first or mother languages as markers of identity while trying to sensitize students to the prudence of being self-driven to learn about the nature of language as well as learning to embrace knowledge of and skills in as many key languages as possible is crucial to the social advancement of Caribbean people.

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